

Chapter 3: Practical Politics: Writing, Speaking, and Riding in the 1898 Campaign

"The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary." -H. L. Mencken

In preparation for the 1898 elections, political parties began to develop their platforms and select candidates. As the election season began in full swing, the attention of North Carolinians was increasingly divided between national patriotism called forth as a result of the Spanish-American War and the brewing political fight in the state.¹

The Spanish-American War was declared on April 14, 1898. President William McKinley had been monitoring the situation closely, and politicians had impressed upon him the potential financial rewards for the United States upon entry into the conflict. By the first of May, the United States was engaged with the Spanish in naval operations. Two months later, after an American victory at the Battle of San Juan Hill and the destruction of the Spanish fleet, the Spanish pressed for peace. As a result of a call to arms from President McKinley and Governor Daniel L. Russell, 106 Wilmington men enlisted in Company K, Second Regiment North Carolina State Troops, also known as the active component of the Wilmington Light Infantry (WLI); another contingent left as crewmembers on the *Nantucket*. Both Company K and the *Nantucket* crew left the state in pursuit of conflict, but neither saw action. The *Nantucket* remained in port in South Carolina, and Company K drilled and marched in Raleigh and Georgia. The men had returned home on furlough by the fall.²

A large number of African Americans from North Carolina also enlisted to fight in the war after Governor Russell authorized the creation of a black battalion in April 1898. Russell appointed Major James H. Young as commander of the battalion, later mustered into service in July as the Third Regiment of North Carolina Troops. Unlike the Second Regiment, the Third remained in camp and service until it was mustered out in February 1899.³

The Democratic machine began to get more organized after the 1896 election even as the Fusionists became more and

docked in Havana, Cuba following rioting in the city between Cubans and the Spanish government. Most of Company K was mustered into service on May 13, 1898 and were mustered out on November 18, 1898. Donald MacRae brother of Hugh MacRae, was Captain. William Lord de Rosset, *Pictorial and Historical New Hanover County*, (Wilmington, N.C.:n.p.,1938), 89; North Carolina Adjutant General's Office, *Roster of the North Carolina Volunteers in the Spanish-American War, 1898-1899* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton and E.M. Uzzell, 1900), 79-81.

³ Wilmington's contribution to the roster of the Third Regiment was 40 privates, 16 officers, 1 musician, and 2 wagoners. The Third Regiment was camped near Fort Macon in the summer and fall of 1898, and its men would often visit Wilmington and other coastal towns. When the men visited, they enraged whites by demanding "equal treatment." The men were transferred from the coast to Tennessee in September where they remained throughout the rest of the campaign season. Some have speculated that if the men of the Third Regiment had also been furloughed and back in Wilmington by the fall of 1898, the election and ensuing violence would have been different. *Roster of North Carolina Volunteers in the Spanish-American War*, 92-117; Willard B. Gatewood Jr., "North Carolina's Negro Regiment in the Spanish-American War," *North Carolina Historical Review* 48 (October 1971): 370-387.

¹ During a white supremacy rally and parade, ladies along the parade route waved both U.S. and Cuban flags. *Wilmington Messenger*, November 4, 1898.

² The final act that precipitated war was the February 15th sinking of the U.S. battleship *Maine*, which was